

VZCZCXRO4736
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHPF #0413/01 0610832
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 020832Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6156
INFO RUEHXS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1332

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000413

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

FOR G/TIP, EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KWMN](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN CAMBODIA'S NORTHWEST

¶1. (U) Summary: A four-day trip to the northwestern provinces of Cambodia revealed a decline in human trafficking due to RGC-NGO cooperation and increased effort to combat the problem. However, mistrust between NGOs and the police hampers anti-trafficking efforts in certain areas. Poverty continues to push people into prostitution and blind migration, conditions that render people vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Poloff and Pol/Econ FSNs traveled to Cambodia's northwestern regions of Battambang, Pailin, and Banteay Meanchey's Poipet from February 13-16 to assess the human trafficking situation in the area. Emboffs met with provincial deputy governors and other government officials, law enforcement authorities, and NGO workers, and visited the shelters for vulnerable children and victims of trafficking. Emboffs also conducted the night tour of the red light areas in the city of Battambang, along Pailin's border with Thailand, and in Poipet.

Battambang

¶3. (U) Human trafficking in the province is primarily for sexual exploitation. Victims of trafficking are found in a variety of business establishments and sexual outlets, such as brothels, karaoke bars, or massage clubs, working as direct and indirect sex workers. Some victims were sold directly by their parents due to the family's economic situation; others were deceived or lured with promises of employment. In the latter case, victims accrued a significant debt and were forced to work as prostitutes to repay the debt. Although no statistics are available, NGO workers believe that most sex workers started out as victims of trafficking and only become voluntary over time.

¶4. (U) Deputy Governor Sean Sothornng reported that human trafficking is not a serious problem in the province due to active police investigations and the cooperation from non-governmental organizations on law enforcement. Available statistics, however, are too limited to support or reject any notion of trafficking trends. The anti-trafficking police reported three cases during the year (in 2004 there were five cases). ADHOC and LICADHO reported 10 cases of human trafficking, including cross-border trafficking to Malaysia and in-country trafficking for sexual exploitation, during 2005 (an increase compared to previous year, when the legal advocacy group, Protection for Juvenile Justice (PJJ), reportedly worked on only two cases).

¶5. (SBU) NGO workers who interface with police on anti-trafficking efforts characterized the situation as one of mistrust. ADHOC, LICADHO, and PJJ staff members regard the anti-trafficking police with apprehension, claiming that

some police inform pimps when they receive complaints from NGOs. NGO workers say that they are able to rescue victims, but the police seldom arrest the traffickers, who manage to escape just before the police raid. (Comment: We have heard similar complaints about the police in Siem Reap. End Comment.)

¶16. (U) Capacity building and training programs are not yet available to the majority of anti-TIP police in Battambang. According to Chan Nareth, Deputy Chief of the Battambang anti-TIP unit, there are 19 police officers in his unit but only a few officers have received training. He added that it is difficult to tackle human trafficking, since most of those engaged in the sex industry are doing so voluntarily.

Pailin

¶17. (U) Pailin is a source, transit and destination point for human trafficking. Some victims are trafficked from other provinces into Pailin's sex industry, while others have been transported to Poipet's border via Pailin to circumvent law enforcement. Despite the existence of the problem, there is general agreement among interlocutors that the situation is not serious. According to the anti-TIP working group, which comprises NGOs, the Department of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (DoSVY), and the Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA), there were five cases of trafficking during 2005. However, the group believes that there likely are other cases that go unreported, or where anti-trafficking efforts were not done in a timely manner.

¶18. (SBU) At ADHOC's initiative, an anti-trafficking working

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group, comprising NGOs such as ADHOC, AFESIP, and the human rights group VIGILENCE, and government agencies such as DoSVY and DoWA, was created and began operations in late 2004 to combat human trafficking. Respondents from both the NGO community and the government agree there exists good coordination and cooperation to resolve cases as they arise. Unfortunately, the police are not part of this effort; and as in Battambang, mistrust of the police is a problem. Members of the working group agreed that getting a timely response from the police is difficult, and sometimes intervention from the municipal governor is necessary.

¶19. (U) Situated to the west of Battambang province and along the Thai border, Pailin is one of the entry points to Thailand. Two casinos have recently been built to the serve Thai clients who cross the border to gamble. A number of karaoke parlors and brothels exist in Pailin town and along the border, leading to some respondents' concerns that these establishments will serve as a hub for trafficking, given Pailin's geographic location and economic conditions.

Banteay Meanchey and Poipet

¶10. (U) Trafficking for labor purposes is the most prominent form of trafficking in Banteay Meanchey and Poipet, the major crossing point to Thailand. Sex trafficking is also an issue, albeit a declining problem, according to local authorities.

¶11. (U) A mobile team, consisting of NGOs, provincial police, DoSVY and the Border Relations Office (comprised of border police and the Cambodian military), was set up in Poipet in 2001 to monitor the deportation of Cambodian illegal migrants from Thailand, as well as identify victims of trafficking. The group patrols the border area, interviews possible victims of trafficking, and refers them to appropriate care. The Cambodian Children and Handicap Development Organization (CCHDO), a member of the mobile team, reported the deportation of approximately 90,000

Cambodian migrants from Thailand in 2005.

¶12. (U) The Transit Center, managed by staff of the DoSVY and financed by IOM, accepts victims identified and repatriated by the Thai authorities, as well as those deported from Thailand and identified by the mobile team. The TC manager reported that 98 trafficked victims were identified and repatriated by Thai authorities, and 88 were identified and referred by the mobile team in 2005. Most of the identified victims of trafficking were children under the age of 18 years who went to Thailand to beg, sell flowers, and work as baby-sitters. A number of shelters are available in the province to provide protective care to child victims of trafficking.

¶13. (U) Most victims of sex trafficking become victimized through deception and debt bondage. Mr. Kouch Theam, Deputy Chief of the Banteay Meanchey anti-TIP police unit, believes that roughly 70 percent of sex workers are either underage or in debt bondage to the pimps, which makes them victims of trafficking. However, there were only three cases of domestic trafficking for sexual exploitation that were recorded in 2005. The unit also reported six cases of cross-border trafficking to Thailand. Kouch Theam added that human trafficking incidences had largely decreased, from 60 cases a year to only nine cases in 2005.

Night Observation of Red-Light Districts

¶14. (SBU) Emboffs visited the red-light areas in the northwestern provinces, posing as customers looking for young girls. Emboffs visited several brothels in Battambang, two (the only ones) in Pailin's border area, and about 15 in Poipet. These brothels are small-scale businesses, with only several women on the premises who provide service. There were no obviously underage prostitutes, although it is difficult to speak to the issue of debt bondage for these workers.

Comment

¶15. (U) Our meetings and conversations with government officials and NGO workers suggest that trafficking is a less worrisome issue than expected. Poverty remains the main factor fueling human trafficking. In spite of NGO prevention programs to raise people's awareness of the

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dangers of trafficking, people often find themselves with no choice but to sell their daughter to pay off family debts, or risk blind migration to search for better economic opportunity. The creation of the anti-trafficking working group in Pailin comprised of NGOs and government officials is a useful model to fight trafficking, but needs to include law enforcement if it is truly to be effective.

MUSSOMELI